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Bounded Mobilities

Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities

[transcript]

Conceptual Notes on the Freedom of Movement and Bounded Mobilities

An afterword by Noel B. Salazar

This timely book focuses on "bounded mobilities". Both the title and the introduction made me reflect on the relation between the two words. What does the qualifier "bounded" add (or do) to the noun? The need to specify boundedness seems to imply that there are forms of mobility that are unbounded, or that the concept of mobility is somehow associated with unboundedness. Indeed, mobility is commonly perceived as a marker of "freedom" and it is a widespread idea that much of what is experienced as freedom lies in mobility. At the same time, restrictions on human movement are commonplace. In general, the ability for people to move freely is spread very unevenly within countries and across the planet. Freedom of movement is also more limited for minors, people charged with or convicted of crimes, women, and for members of disfavoured racial and social groups. In addition, special circumstances, such as war or conflict, affect the freedom of movement.

Freedom of movement on a global scale refers to "the right of people to circulate without restrictions across the surface of the world" (Pécoud 2013, 1). By "right" is meant only that others have a duty not to interfere with people's attempts to cross borders.[1] Arguments in favour of free movement pertain mostly to economic (or political) efficiency and to ethical considerations (3). From a general economic perspective, freedom of movement would create a "unified world labour market" (2). The longstanding ethical argument is often traced back to Immanuel Kant's essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), where he argued that states need to submit themselves to cosmopolitan laws, embracing all the peoples of the earth. This was based on the premise that the peoples of the earth own the earth and, therefore, must be free to travel anywhere on its surface.

The link between movement, freedom and rights has long been recognised and is well-established. Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human

1 | This is trickier than it seems, because the freedom of movement experienced by one person might be conceived by another as a threat of intrusion.

Rights states that: (a) "Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state", and (b) "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country". Importantly, these rights are entirely framed by the organisation of the world into sovereign states. There is no human right of free movement across borders and no right to access or to settle (immigrate) within another country (Pécoud and de Guchteneire 2007). The arguments against the latter were formulated decades ago:

> [...] problems of finding housing and employment, of graduating political participation in order to prevent the "swamping" of a social or cultural system, of extending educational, health, and other social facilities. Finally, there is a separate problem of limiting births to culturally acceptable levels so that people would not feel they were being displaced by raw Darwinian tactics. (Nett 1971, 226)

Moreover, the right to leave one's country is also not uncontested, as it is connected with "brain drain, political use of information, loss of subjects (e. g. military draftees), and the implied rejection or loss of popularity of a country or its leaders when people have left it" (226).[2]

Importantly, as Mimi Sheller (2008) argues, the freedom of movement is not just a personal right or capacity, but also has sovereign dimensions that are socially relational and civic dimensions that are collective and public:

> Personal freedom of mobility centres on the scale of the body: how the body moves, where it can move, when it can move. Sovereignal freedom of mobility, in comparison, extends beyond the individual body to encompass issues of governance, legitimacy, and the exercise of power whether in a familial home, an organization, a city or a nation; thus it concerns mobilities at larger scales. And civic freedoms of mobility likewise extend beyond the individual body to the collective mobilities of multiple publics, of social movements, of bodies of citizens and far-flung networks of communication. (Sheller 2008, 30)

As Sheller rightfully remarks, "sovereignal freedom has often been exercised as a freedom of movement which immobilizes others; in fact the sense of freedom of movement often depends on the denial of others' mobility. Hence it produces what we might refer to as mobility injustice" (28). Freedom of movement, then, appears as an issue for global justice (Pécoud 2013, 2). When movement is disrupted in one realm, it may actually be met with efforts to increase mobility in another (see Salazar and Smart 2011). Personal freedom of movement, for instance, has led to new kinds of resistance against mobility injustice, such as the embrace of nomadism as

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2 | These arguments have been recycled over and over again. Some of the most common justifications used to spoil attempts at broadening the migration discussion are "concerns about the number of anticipated immigrants, the potential for brain drain, the utopian nature of the proposal, and the effect of immigration on national culture and security" (Moses 2006, 164).

a counter-tactic against sovereign and civic forms of control over mobility, access and collectivity (Braidotti 2006).

Another important point is that "freedom *as* mobility" is composed both of opportunities to travel when and where one pleases and of the feasibility of the choice not to travel at all (Sager 2006, 465). As Tore Sager writes:

> Freedom as mobility may be valued for two main reasons. First, the possibility of travelling might be valued in itself. In order to experience freedom as potential travel, there must be possibilities allowing for more transport than the number of trips actually taken. The individual must also be in a position to autonomously decide whether to act on the possibilities. That is, the potentiality aspect of mobility means that the individual has a choice between travelling and not travelling. This is an essential aspect of freedom as mobility; freedom of movement implies the right not to move. (469)

It is doubtful, for instance, whether there are many "existential migrants" (Madison 2010), people who freely move, not in search of a better life or to expand their options, but merely for the sake of moving. This brings us back to the boundedness of (most) mobilities, the theme of this edited volume. There is only a tiny economic global élite "which financial capitalism has liberated from all spatial constraints and which, therefore, produces the only social group able to choose freely between mobility and immobility" (Gherardi 2011, 108).

From movement to mobility

Ideas concerning the (dis)advantages of mobility must be seen as part of wider value systems. Inspired by the work of Tim Cresswell (2006), I define mobility as movement imbued with either self-ascribed or attributed meanings (Salazar and Jayaram 2016). Analytically speaking, movements (as brute acts of motion) become mobilities when they gain meaning as experienced and imagined socio-cultural assemblages. People are moving all the time, but not all movements are equally meaningful and life-shaping (both for those who move and those who stay put). Neither "movers" nor "stayers" consume the innate significance of mobilities; rather, they construe it in dynamic relations of exchange and interaction (Chu 2010). The more a society valorises movement (and, thus, turns it into mobility), the greater the significance of "mobility capital" – the resources, knowledge or abilities gained by being mobile. Such capital can be deployed over the life-course for personal, social or career enhancement in two major ways. Firstly, it can facilitate future moves by enhancing people's differential (cosmopolitan) capacity and potential for mobility, also termed "motility" (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004). Alternatively, it can be exchanged for other forms of capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986): economic (material resources), social (relational networks) and cultural (embodied dispositions and competencies of cosmopolitanism) capital.

Mobility capital can, thus, turn mobilities into new indexes of prestige, power and symbolic status, new markers of distinction (see Bourdieu 1984). As Zygmunt Bauman has noted, "Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times" (1998, 2). In other words, mobility has an important aspirational component. It is the infinity of promised and assumed opportunities arising from movement that is valued most (Elliott and Urry 2010). However, although prominent mobility theorists, such as John Urry (2007, 52), acknowledge that societies are not equivalent in their valuation of mobility, there is very little research on why and how these values differ, apart from obvious differences in travel opportunities and resources.

The ethnographic approach advocated in this volume is crucial in empirically problematizing the cultural assumptions, meanings and values attached to movement (Salazar 2010). People are required to take responsibility and to regulate their mobilities in a manner that confirms that they are choosing freely, while, in fact, they act within clearly defined fields of possibilities (see Bourdieu 1984). The ideological associations with liberty, freedom and universalism contain serious shortcomings and neglect the social costs. Indeed, notwithstanding low-cost airlines and the like, free movement is far from "free" (in the sense of "without costs"). People's mobility "choices" are pertinent to and normalised within the dominant ideologies and mobility regimes with which they engage (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). In fact, critically engaged anthropologists were among the first to point out that contemporary forms of mobility need not signify privilege (Amit 2007).

Many people feel the "burden of mobility" (Cass, Shove, and Urry 2005). Research on the human costs of hypermobility among managers of multinationals shows the importance of questioning the "voluntary" aspect and individual desirability of mobility (Gherardi 2011). Tourism is another telling example. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) pointed out a long time ago that people may be less "free" than they think they are in their choice of leisurely activities, including where and how to go on holidays. Pre-packaged resort or cruise tourism are perhaps the most extreme touristic forms of bounded mobilities.

Towards unbounded mobilities?

Many contemporary scholars valorise, if not outright romanticise, ideas of travel and of mobility. Mobility ideologies equate geographical movement with social fluidity, negating the fact that social structures also contribute to mobility behaviour, that movements are subject to social constraint and that opportunities of upward socio-economic mobility to which the individual seemingly responds by being physically mobile are as much "freely" wanted and realised opportunities as

choices by default (with the legal structures regulating who can and cannot move being crucial).[3] Despite the increase in the possibilities of travel, the ability to move "freely" is spread very unevenly. Transnational mobility remains particularly a highly differentiated and differentiating activity (Salazar and Glick Schiller 2014).

This volume showcases nicely the inherent paradox in the contemporary idealization of freedom of movement: "'freedom' entails developing the infrastructure to defend the free movement and operation of some, and to strictly curtail the freedom of others" (James 2005, 27). Moreover, not all movements are valued equally positively and the processes that produce global movements also result in immobility and exclusion (Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Salazar and Smart 2011).[4] Restrictions on mobility limit people's freedom to circulate, thus, leading to a higher rate of permanent migration and discouraging seasonal workers, for example, from returning, temporarily or not, to their country of origin. Mexican migration to the United States illustrates these points well: migrants keep trying to cross the militarized border until they succeed and, given the difficulty of doing so, tend to remain on a more permanent basis in the country (Holmes 2013).

In 1971, Roger Nett wrote that the right of free movement of people on the face of the earth was the civil right we are not ready for. This volume confirms that this still seems to be the case today. Although the majority of the world's population stays put, there is a fear that as more people have the ability to cross borders, they will automatically do so. This rests on a failure to distinguish between mobility and motility – the ability to move (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004). There is no uniform global trend towards more mobility, anywhere, anytime. More people are enacting their right to stay put than their right to move (Salazar 2011). Another persistent misconception is the assumption that free movement equals more migration (in the sense of permanent settlement) instead of mobility (movements back and forth). Scholarship is still too focused on the former. We urgently need to address the latter, as mobility raises a whole different set of issues, the most important probably being the question of sustainability.

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3 | This discussion is actually a reworking of the structure–agency debate within the social sciences and social theory, the primacy of social forces vs. free will in shaping human behaviour (e. g. Giddens 1984). It would be a big mistake, however, to equate structure with immobility and agency with mobility (as is often done).

4 | In fact, mobility and immobility are two sides of the same coin. It makes sense to take them apart analytically, but, in practice, they are always linked to and dependent on one another (Salazar and Smart 2011).

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